

Verb Allomorphy in French-related Creoles

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In French-related creoles a distinction between long and short forms of (some classes of) verbs is made (eg *manzj* vs *manzje* 'eat'). Although in a number of cases it seems to be phonologically governed (Come 1999), this distinction also correlates with syntactic properties. Interestingly, the syntactic correlation differs in (almost) each French creole. In Louisiana Creole (LC) it correlates with the finiteness of the verb (Rottet 1992), In Mauritian Creole (MC), on the other hand, it depends on the theta-theoretic status of the phrase following the verb, basically argument vs. adjunct (Seuren 1990, Syea 1992). Whereas the factor determining the grammatical underpinning of this alternation might come from the superstrate language in the case of LC (see Becker & Veenstra (2003) for arguments that it only involves "late" adstrate influence here), superstrate influence cannot account for the other pattern. Therefore, it can only be due to either substrate influence or universal processes in creolization. In this paper we mainly focus on the pattern as found in Mauritian Creole. We argue that it is due to universal processes of second language acquisition. We further argue that the alternation started out as a phonological/prosodic phenomenon (as it still basically is in Haitian Creole) but was subsequently grammaticalized in MC.

The long/short alternation in MC is reminiscent of the conjoint/disjoint (CJ/DJ) distinction in Bantu languages (Meeussen 1959, Creissels 1986). Bantu languages have been argued to be part of the substrate group for MC. The CJ/DJ distinction refers to verb allomorphy found in some tense-aspect paradigms that is conditioned by the verb's relation to other elements in the clause. The DJ form is obligatory used when the verb is clause-final, while the CJ form needs some clause-internal constituent to follow the verb. Givón (1975) and, more recently, Ndayiragije (1999) and Güldemann (2003), have argued that this distinction is directly related to Focus: the DJ is used when the verb is in focus, the CJ when the constituent immediately following the verb is in focus. We will show, however, that the Bantu CJ/DJ distinction only superficially resembles the MC pattern, but that the grammatical underpinning of the allomorphy is completely different. In MC Focus is not the deciding factor, but the argument/adjunct distinction. This rules out a scenario in terms of Bantu substrate influence.

In turn, we argue that universals of second language acquisition played an important role in the emergence of the long/short alternation. The scenario runs as follows (cf. Becker & Veenstra 2003). The enslaved population consisting of second language learners picked up a phonological alternation from the input (superstrate language) without the appropriate functions, and (re)interpreted it differently. Eventually the opposition was linked to different syntactic/semantic oppositions. We show that in Basic Varieties of French (Dietrich et al 1995, Noyau et al 1995, Perdue 1993, Starren 2000) we find a similar situation. The acquisition of the form precedes the acquisition of the function. We argue that a comparison with such Basic Varieties allows us to be more precise about the moment that target shift (cf. Baker 1990) took place in the contact situation.

We propose that the ultimate origin of the alternation lies in its phonological nature. As Gussenhoven (1983) observed there is a direct relationship between accent assignment and the argument/adjunct distinction. We argue that the pattern as exhibited by Haitian Creole (HC) is strong evidence for such a direct relationship. As DeGraff (2001) shows, prosodic factors play an important role in the long/short alternation in HC. He identifies the following contexts: (i) when the object of a verb has undergone *wh*-movement and the verb is the last overt element in the VP, this verb is strongly preferred to surface in the short form (as opposed to when the verb is followed by its complement); (ii) full NPs, but not pronominal objects (which are phonological clitics), induce the short form when following the verb; (iii) emphasis disfavors the occurrence of the short form. The HC-pattern, however, is only reminiscent (and not identical) to that of MC. Whereas the long/short opposition is stated in terms of preference and subject to variation among the different dialects of Haitian, the distribution of the long and short forms is categorial in MC and not subject to dialect variation. We conclude that prosodic factors do not play an important role in the MC-pattern.

We further propose that MC has gone one step further than HC and has grammaticalized the long/short alternation to only superficially mark the argument/adjunct distinction. We argue that the form of the verb is determined at each Phase (Chomsky 2001). If the verb ends up in the final position of a Phase, it will be spelled out in the long form. Two contexts are identified where this occurs: (i) when the internal argument has undergone leftward movement; (ii) when there is no internal argument. Adjuncts, on the other hand, are merged after completion of the Phase, and therefore do not induce the short form.

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